

Grumpy Old Softie

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Summary: Bors has always had the reputation of being the Sarmatian Knights' resident "hard man," or the tough nut always spoiling for a good brawl and rarely has the chance to show his gentle, caring nature, until now â€¦ Follow-up to "Crush."

Grumpy Old Softie

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****Warning:**** _contains references to non-movie knights. Also slightly AU due to the timeline having been tinkered with.

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****Grumpy Old Softie****

The front door abruptly slammed then rapid footsteps were heard racing up the wooden staircase before another door was violently closed. The force with which the door was shut reverberated throughout the house and instantly had the lady of the house leaving the sanctuary of her kitchen to stand worriedly at the foot of the stairs.

Looking upward towards the door facing the top of the landing, Vanora carded slim fingers wearily through her titian curls and debated whether she should follow or wait until her eldest daughter willingly sought her out. She sighed softly, knowing instinctively that she would be in for a long wait.

Esyllt had never been an easy child. Wilful. Wayward. A born rebel. Fiercely independent and extremely intelligent, the seventeen year old didn't suffer fools gladly and was completely fearless. Much like

she herself had been at that age. Esyllt could, at times, be hard-headed and talk about being volatile â€¦ She also had a sly, wicked sense of humour that was responsible for many a sleepless night her poor, beleaguered parents suffered since the moment she was able to crawl and wrap her gullible â€" _no,_ completely besotted - father around her little finger. Esyllt preferred the company of animals over people, finding them easier to care for and trust. Yet when she did love and trust, she did so wholeheartedly and without reservation, her loyalty towards her friends and loved ones boundless. She defended those she cared for fiercely ... And anyone foolish enough to cross or hurt her kin, usually lived to regret it as Esyllt rarely forgave and never forgot. Yet despite her faults - and there were many - and how often she drove her parents to despair, she was also loved equally and deeply by them.

Vanora was jolted from her thoughts, by the sound of the door closing behind her, followed by the heavy, weary tread of familiar footsteps. She turned and found herself facing the man that she loved and the father of her children.

Bors carefully propped a large battle-axe to rest against the stairs and rolled his broad shoulders to prevent the muscles from stiffening further. He groaned with relief before reaching out and drew Vanora into his arms, kissing her soundly on the lips.

Vanora sighed contentedly into the kiss and wrapped her slim arms around his neck, revelling in the feel of his hard, bulky frame as he moulded her soft, lithe curves against him. It still amazed her that despite being together for almost nineteen summers and the fact that she bore him several children over the years, she still wanted and desired him as much now as she had then.

Bors eventually stopped ravishing his better half as the realization that they both needed some air finally struck him. He reluctantly pulled away yet still held his fiery lover in a loose embrace, before eyeing her sheepishly with adoring eyes.

"Was that our Es tearing in here earlier ? Looked like she had a pack of Ulric's hounds hot on her heels."

Vanora nodded and tilted her head in the direction of the stairs. "Aye, love, it was. Didn't see her though ... only heard her storming into her room 'n' the door slamming after her. Why ?"

Bors groaned and dragged a weary hand down his rugged face before reaching out to gently tuck a stray lock of titian curls behind Vanora's ear. The confirmation of what he'd thought he'd witnessed was far from good. "Oh, for mercy's sake â€¦ what mischief has she got herself into this time ?"

"Gods only know," Vanora murmured softly as her slender hands toyed idly with the dark scarf her man wore haphazardly around his neck. "I don't know how she does it, but I wish she wasn't drawn to trouble like a moth to a flame. Don't get me wrong, I love our eldest dearly but ..." Her voice trailed away.

The stocky Roxolani grinned. "I know you do ... But that's Esyllt for you. 'N' she can be very trying when the mood strikes her. Wouldn't be her if she wasn't â€¦"

Carefully extracting herself from her lover's hold, Vanora nodded then briskly wiped her floury hands upon the clean cloth she'd tied around her still slender waist as a make-shift apron. "Aye, that's our Es alright ... So ... ?"

Bors frowned in silent contemplation and remained unusually subdued.

"Then I'd best go and see what's upset her then seeing as you're as much use as a nun in a bawdy house..." Vanora stated bluntly, clearly worried about this rare display of emotion by her eldest. It was unusual for Eshyllt to show her feelings as she tended to bottle things up. Eshyllt believed her emotions were private and that revealing them was a sign of weakness. Vanora was about to place her foot on the bottom step of the staircase, when she felt the familiar, yet far from unwelcome pressure of Bors' callused hand her forearm.

The outspoken warrior shook his head, "'S alright, love, I'll go ... with any luck I may be able to twist her arm into 'fessin' up to what's got her so wound up ..."

Vanora smiled ruefully, "Well, only if you feel up to another battle of wills â€¦ You know damn well if your daughter doesn't want to share anything, you've more chance getting blood out of a stone ..."

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Bors rapped firmly on the door and asked softly, well, as softly as he was capable of being, "Eshyllt ... can I come in ?"

A muffled voice replied, "_No ! _G'away ... Leave me alone ..."

Groaning inwardly, Bors sighed and entered the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Es, what's wrong ?" Moving further into the dimly lit room, Bors could make out his daughter's body lying on top of the bed with her back to the door, curled into a foetal position; long, toned arms were wrapped protectively around the young girl's slender waist as she cradled a pillow closely to her torso.

"Nothing's wrong ..." came the unusually quiet, emotionless reply, instead of the heated, snapped response Bors had been expecting. "All I want is to be left in peace ... What part of 'go away 'n' leave me alone" don't you understand, Da' ?"

Bors gave a half-amused snort and replied gruffly, "You ought t' know me well enough by now, little one, that I _never_ know when t' leave well alone. If you don't believe me, ask your Uncle Dag, he'll be the first t' tell you I'm bloody sodding useless at leaving things be â€¦"

Instead of making her curious father withdraw, Eshyllt's listless response had the exact opposite effect. Bors approached the bed and the mattress dipped as he carefully sat on it. He reached across to lightly lay a large, callused hand on Eshyllt's shoulder and squeezed it gently.

"C'mon, Es ... talk to me. Don't let whatever's upset you fester - it'll only make you feel worse in the end. Y' know you can tell your old Da' anything 'n' it'll go no further, if that's what you want ... You never know, might help ..." Bors carefully swept a swathe of glossy hair away from his eldest's face and briefly admired the dark chestnut highlights that streaked throughout it beneath the light.

"D-Don't ..." Esysllt absently tried to brush Bors' hand away, before surreptitiously attempting to wipe her face with the back of her hand. "Please, Da' ... just leave it. Nothing - no one - can help me this time- "

Bors rubbed his nape anxiously as all kind of thoughts raced through his mind as to what scrape his daughter had managed to get entangled in this time. He felt helpless as a sudden unpleasant thought struck him and slowly began to turn Esysllt around. What he was faced with, was the last thing Bors expected to see from his child. Esysllt had a habit of hiding her feelings ... of being impassive ... even though her family knew it was far from the case. But the obvious distress and panic he saw on Esysllt's pretty, tear-stained face left Bors both stunned and bewildered. The fact that she'd actually been crying was enough to alarm him, as Esysllt never cried. Not even when she was injured and in pain. She never cried. Believed that tears were a sign of weakness ... and if there was anything his eldest loathed, it was being perceived as weak or vulnerable.

Taking a deep breath, Bors rubbed his lower lip thoughtfully with the pad of his forefinger and realized he'd have to sensitively broach what he needed to ask. He silently cursed himself, well aware that sensitivity, tact and diplomacy were foreign traits to him.

"Now, Es, there's something I need to ask you ... So, promise me you'll hear me out 'fore you interrupt me or lose your temper." Bors' steady gaze flickered briefly to Esysllt's flat stomach before returning to her face. "Are you ... are you in trouble ?"

"What ?! Da' ... No ! I'm not !_" was an indignant Esysllt's immediate reply, a spark of fire fleetingly appeared in her velvety dark eyes. "How stupid and pathetic do you think I am ? The last thing I need or want is a child ... I don't have a burning need to have a baby, if that's what's worrying you- "

"Then what's wrong ?" Bors asked gently. "What's so bad that it has you in tears ? 'Cause something's bothering you 'n' you never cry, little one. Never ! Has anyone hurt you or laid a finger where they shouldn't have ?"

Esysllt sniffed delicately and wiped a stray tear away from her cheek as she sat up to face both her father and best friend. "It's worse than that ... far, far worse ..."

Puzzled, the furrow in Bors' brow deepened. "I don't understand, Es. What could be possibly be worse æ| ?"

"I've really fucked up this time, Da' ... I swear I never meant to. Truly. But ... But I did." Her slim shoulders slumped and her head bowed, causing her long chestnut mane to fall forward, shielding her face.

"Es ?" Concerned, Bors leant closer and took Esyllt's hand and cradled it between both of his.

"This wasn't supposed to happen ... not to me. It's not what I want - "

"What isn't what you want, love ?"

"_This ! _What I'm feeling ... The way I feel. Bloody hell ! I hate this, Da'. I hate feeling this way. Feeling so weak ... so gods-damned helpless ... so bloody confused all the time. 'Specially when I'm around him. It's not me, Da' ... It's not me ... 'n' it really pisses me off !" She sighed heavily and began to pick at an imaginary piece of lint on the skirt of her deep blue dress.

Bors slipped his arm around his daughter, drawing her close so that her head rested upon his broad shoulder, against the dark leather of his tunic. "You told this lad any of this ? How you feel ... ?"

"No. 'N' I'm not planning to either- "

"But, Es- "

"There's no "buts." I can't ... 'n' I won't. How the hell can I ? How can I tell him that I hate him for what he's doing to me ?"

Bors pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger as he struggled to comprehend the workings of his child's tortured mind. "Well, unless you tell me what he's done, you daft bint, I can't help you, can I ?"

The pretty redhead abruptly withdrew and was on her feet in an instant, pacing the room like a caged beast in such a rapid manner that it made Bors' head fairly spin.

"D'ya really want to know ? Hmmm ? Alright, I'll tell you ... The bastard's only gone 'n' made me care for him ... Made me see him in a different light ... Made me want him when he doesn't even know I exist ... Now d'ya understand why I hate him ? It hurts Da' ... it hurts so bloody much."

The gobby pugilist chewed his lip pensively as he pondered what his daughter had just confessed. He noted a brief look of desperate longing and intense pain which clouded Esyllt's dark brown eyes. Then, inhaling deeply, Bors spoke.

"C'mon, Es, tell me â€| Y' know you can tell your old Da' anything. 'N' if you're fretting I'll go mouthing off 'bout it, I solemnly swear t' keep my trap shut â€|"

The comment about "keeping his trap shut" managed to tease a faint, reluctant smile from his distressed daughter. She knew only too well what her Da' was like. How he either struggled to prevent his yap from running away from him. Or how his formidable temper often got the better of him and usually resulted in him saying things that were really better off kept quiet.

Esyllt shrugged and slowly shook her head. "I know you mean well, Da' 'n' you're only looking out for me, but ... I can't. _I daren't

..._"

"Es," Bors sighed heavily. "You're my eldest. My pride 'n' joy 'n' the apple of my eye. Y' know I'd do anything to make you happy â€| 'N' I want you t' be happy. I want that more than anything for you. Now, if 'fessin' up this blind oaf's name so I can open his eyes 'n' give him a gentle nudge in your direction would make you happy, I'm bloody well going to do it. So be a good girl for your old Da' 'n' tell me, for mercy's sake â€|"

Esyllt reluctantly raised a tear-stained face and met his gaze unwaveringly. After several moments of intense contemplation, of weighing the pros and cons of revealing the identity of the man she cared for, she inhaled deeply and decided to come clean.

"L-Lamorak â€| It's Lamorak â€|"

Bloody bugging hell ! Bors thought. _Why him ? Why couldn't it be anyone but him ? Anyone â€| Why couldn't it be Kay ? Kay, who was a good, kindly, sweet lad who clearly worshipped the ground Esyllt walked upon. Kay, who'd willingly â€" no, eagerly â€" walk on water and crawl through the fiery pits of Arthur's hell, for his precious daughter â€| Kay who'd defend Esyllt with his very last breath and would certainly die for her if needed â€|_

Groaning softly, Bors closed his eyes and dragged a weary hand down his face then muttered to himself, _"Bloody hell !"_

His reaction immediately dismayed his daughter further.

"You don't approve, do you ? You don't think he's right for me ?"

"It's not that I don't approve, Es- "

"Then what, Da' ? _What ?_ Is it because he's older than me ? Is that it ?

"No- "

"Then what ? _Tell me !_ Why aren't you happy about this ? About the man I love ?"

Shaking his head sadly, Bors reached out and gently cradled his daughter's cheek with a large, callused hand. He was dismayed to see her dark eyes glistening with fresh tears and her full, lower lip trembling.

"I swear to you, little one, it isn't that. But 'Rak ? Anyone but him 'n' I'd be more than willing to help."

"Then why, Da' ? _Why ?_ I thought you liked Lamorak â€|"

"_I do._ I respect the daft bugger as well. But this ? No, love â€| I can't support your feelings in this. I can't help you."

Esyllt jerked her head up abruptly and glared at her beloved father with furious, betrayed eyes. "Well, so much for your promises of wanting to help me gain my happiness â€| I take it that was all talk ?"

"Now, Es, that's not true. Anyone else 'n' I'd help you like a shot. But Lamorak ? No. He's the one person I could never help you win his heart. I love a challenge as much as the next knight in this gods-forsaken hole, but with 'Rak I'd be fighting a losing battle from the very start. One we've no hope of ever winning â€|"

His daughter's dark eyes narrowed in contemplation as she carded slim fingers through her chestnut locks, sweeping them away from her face.

"'N' why in goddess' name, not ? Any man can be won," she stated matter-of-factly, "given the right incentive ..."

"_Not_ this one, Es, not this one â€|" He reached for her hand and gently held it between his. "Look, there's something you need to know. 'N' now you're old enough to understand, I don't see why you can't hear it. Y' know the tales that have passed down through every generation of the Roxolani, aye ?"

Esyllt merely nodded and waited for him to continue.

"Well â€| then you probably know the one about soul mates ? Of finding your destined partner. The one chosen for you by the gods â€| Well, all that crap is true. At least, it is when it comes to me 'n' your Ma'. Knew the moment I clapped eyes on her that she was the one. The one I was meant to be with. That she was special. Same goes for Dag 'n' Tris. Dag realized the Scout was his everything, his reason for living, the instant he saw him. That he could never be with anyone else and truly be happy. For Tris, it took a little longer to sink in, but that's 'cause he's a stubborn, wilful bastard. But when it comes to Dag, the Scout knows they're two halves of one whole â€|"

"Oh â€|"

Bors eyed his eldest warily and sensed that she finally understood what he'd been trying to tell her. To let her know exactly _why_ Lamorak could never be with her. Could never care or love her the way she wanted him to. That they'd never be idyllically happy with each other.

"So you're telling me, Lamorak isn't free ? That he _can't_ be with me ? That he has a s- "

Bors nodded slowly and replied gruffly, "Soul mate. Aye, he does, lass. One that means the world to the daft bugger. Now d'ya see why this can't be ? Why it's impossible for you to have feelings for him ? 'Rak's a good man but he's _not_ free to love you. He could never love you, not even if he wanted to. Could never give his heart to you, simply 'cause it's no longer his to give away â€| 'cause he's already given it to the one the gods chose for him."

"Then who, Da' ? Who's the wench lucky enough to have him ?" Esyllt reluctantly asked the question she dreaded hearing the answer to. "'Cause I've not seen him with anyone of note."

Bors snorted with barely concealed amusement, knowing that the answer would baffle his daughter. "Er, well â€| no one said his soul mate _had_ to be a woman, did they ? Look at Dag 'n' Tris â€|"

Esyllt's soft dark eyes widened and her lips parted in surprise.
"N-Not Y- ?"

"Aye, little one. 'Rak's bonded with Ywain. They're shield-mates 'n' have been for a while."

"When you say a while, how long ?"

"A least a year, I think, could be more, I dunno. All you need to know is that they've been together, are together 'n' will always be together no matter who or what â€| 'Rak belongs to Ywain as surely as Yws is his. 'N' trying to come between them will cause nowt but grief 'n' trouble for all concerned â€|"

Esyllt's face fell at her father's last comment. She knew the Roxolani tales well. Had heard them since childhood and knew that trying to split a bonded couple was never a good thing. That it would bring nothing but ill fortune to the one who attempted to break the bond.

"So â€| what you're telling me is that I should give up ? That I should forget about him ? That there's no hope ?" And Esyllt, who was such a bright, perceptive girl with a kind and loving nature, knew deep down that she couldn't keep on carrying a torch for the handsome, older knight. Nor could she live with herself if she attempted to break what Lamorak had with Ywain â€| or ultimately, cause either of them any pain.

She sighed heavily. "You're right, Da'. I could never â€| would never_ â€| come between them. Not if they're meant to be together and love each other as deeply as you claim. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I ended up hurting them or disappointing you and Mam if I did â€|"

As Esyllt spoke, Bors couldn't help noting sadly the resolve which seemed to course through his daughter's slender frame; the way her strikingly attractive face hardened with determination and pride and how the glimmer of light and the fire which had burned in her eyes suddenly waned ... and finally disappeared.

"Best you go back downstairs, 'Da, lest Mam sends out a search party for you- "

"Esyllt- "

"Please, 'Da ... " Esyllt pleaded huskily, shocking Bors by such an uncharacteristic act. Esyllt, like himself, never begged and now here she was, doing just that. "I'll be fine, I promise ... I just need to be on my own for now. I need to think ..."

Taking one final look at the haughty expression and dead-eyed look his eldest conveyed, all Bors could do was comply with her wishes, even though he knew Esyllt was hiding what she truly felt. And worst of all, being denied what she longed for ... a chance of happiness.

Bors could only hope and pray that one day she'd finally notice the darkly handsome, young knight who yearned deeply for her. That she'd finally be aware of Kay's silent, reassuring presence in the shadows

and that his feelings for her were both intense and genuine.

Frowning lightly, Bors bent down to brush his lips gently across Esyllt's forehead and left the chamber as quietly as he'd entered it.

****FINIS****

End
file.